

LET ME COUNT THE WAYS**JEREMIAH 10:6-16; 32:17-23**

Let me show you a few pictures. You tell me what they all have in common. Yes, they are all pictures of idols – some ancient and some modern – but they’re all idols. OK, the last one is a bit questionable. Trent Harmon was the last contestant to win the title of American Idol on the TV show by the same name. I always thought was a very curious name for both a show and an award. American Idol.

We’re taking a journey through the Old Testament prophecy of Jeremiah. A major subject is idolatry. Most of the people of Israel had gone after other gods. God had had enough. He was sending the mighty Babylonian army to destroy the city of Jerusalem, utterly demolish the temple built to honor the Lord, and then deport the majority of God’s people to distant lands. And it was all because of idols. Do you think idols are still a problem today? It depends on how you define an idol. If you limit idols to literal objects made out of wood, stone, or metal, then idolatry is probably not a major concern today. But if you buy into the biblical truth that anything or anyone that takes God’s rightful place in a person’s life is an idol, then idolatry is still a huge problem for human beings.

Idolatry isn’t just something people who live in primitive, uneducated cultures practice. It’s not just an Old Testament problem. John Calvin, the great theologian and church leader, said that your heart and my heart is an idol factory. We just produce idols effortlessly. We seek something or someone to worship and we don’t always choose the one, true God. Idolatry looks completely different today than it did in Jeremiah’s time. Idols are anything and anyone that takes God’s rightful place in our lives as the One who provides fulfillment, satisfaction, security, and significance. But doesn’t becoming a follower of Jesus and a worshiper of the one, true God mean that we’re automatically free of the danger of idolatry? I wish it were that simple! The most common warning in the Bible for Christians is not about lying, gossip, adultery, stealing, or murder. It’s about idolatry. The Bible says to followers of Jesus, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” (1 Jo. 5:21 NIV)

Our hearts are idol factories? How so? Let’s name a few. Materialism and consumerism can be an idol. Accumulating far more stuff than we need or can use. Always and forever needing to have more, better, and newer even if getting over our heads into debt is the result. Finding greater joy and pleasure in things than in our relationship with God. Success can be an idol. It can demonstrate itself by becoming a workaholic. You tell your neglected family all those long hours are for them, but it’s really all about you and your ego. It can demonstrate itself by making personal achievement the goal of my life – getting another degree, pursuing another promotion, chasing after another award. Accumulating wealth is a major idol in America today. Money can be a blessing from God. He wants us to meet our own needs and not become dependent on others. But when increasing your net worth by whatever means possible, or using the excuse of saving to withhold the tithe and gifts to the poor, or even making investing for retirement the primary focus of your life, something good has become something evil. An idol is anything or anyone I love more than God, want more than God, desire more than God, treasure more than God, and enjoy more than God.

An idol can be another human being – a romantic partner, a spouse, or a child. An idol can be a celebrity, a hobby, or following a sports team of some kind. An idol can be sexual stimulation. An idol can be an image of yourself that you try to project to others on and through social media. The list of potential and very real idols is almost limitless and they tempt Christians just as much as non-Christians.

So, how did Jeremiah address the rampant idolatry in his day? Yes, he denounced it vigorously. But he also reminded God's people of God's incredible greatness. By comparing the one, true God with the helplessness of idols, Jeremiah underlined the incredible foolishness of idolatry. He revealed how absurd and evil it is to put anything or anyone in the place of God. He kind of asked a rhetorical question, "When you have the privilege of worshiping and serving the incredibly great one, true God, why would you ever settle for anything or anyone else?" Let's shine a spotlight on six examples of God's greatness found in the passages we read. First of all...

GOD IS INCOMPARABLE.

Jeremiah said, "LORD, there is no one like you! For you are great, and your name is full of power. Who would not fear you, O King of nations? That title belongs to you alone! Among all the wise people of the earth and in all the kingdoms of the world, there is no one like you." (Jer. 10:6-7 NLT) In other words, the God presented in the Bible cannot be compared to any other god. He is incomparable. The Bible teaches us here and elsewhere that our God is so unique, so special, so one of a kind, that He cannot properly be compared to any other so-called god. Unlike false gods, He actually exists and His power is both real and limitless. I would guess most Americans assume that Allah, the god worshiped by Muslims, is just the same being as the God of the Bible by another name. No, Allah is certainly not the same being as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot compare Him to Allah, or Buddha, or the many gods of Hinduism. By way of comparison, idols don't represent a real god and their power is an illusion. As Jeremiah points out, "Do not be afraid of such gods, for they can neither harm you nor do you any good." (Jer. 10:5 NLT) How can you possibly compare a false god or an idol to the one, true God? How can you compare the power, wisdom, and understanding of the Lord to the total absence of any kind of strength, intelligence, or ability offered by idols? Here's a second example of God's greatness...

GOD IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE.

Jeremiah ties God's greatness to God's creative power. "But the LORD made the earth by his power, and he preserves it by his wisdom. With his own understanding he stretched out the heavens.... But the God of Israel is no idol! He is the Creator of everything that exists.... O Sovereign LORD! You made the heavens and earth by your strong hand and powerful arm. Nothing is too hard for you! (Jer. 10:12, 16; 32:17 NLT) Over in the New Testament, Paul, the Christian leader made the same observation, "For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God." (Rom 1:20-21 NLT) In

other words, the created universe around us displays God's power. It reveals that there is a God and His power is immense – it's incomprehensible power. All the more reason to reject idols. Can you really believe a little object made out of stone, wood, or metal put all of what you see together and makes it continue to work together? Or – to modern day idolaters – what pathetic god are you going to put in the place of the one, true God who put all of the natural world and the universe together by His power?

Recently, I read Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for a Creator*. He interviewed leading scientists about scientific evidence that points toward God. If you know people who think life just happened of its own accord, they need to read this book. One of the chapters was about the incredible uniqueness of the planet we live on that has allowed life to flourish. Earth's location, size, composition, structure, atmosphere, temperature, internal dynamics, and its many intricate cycles essential to life point clearly to a place that is exquisitely and precariously designed for life. For example, if the Earth's distance from the sun was moved by just five percent either way animal life would be impossible. If our Earth's orbit around the sun were not an almost perfect circle, it wouldn't be able to sustain steady temperatures and predictable climates that come as the result of its orbit. The more you know about the natural world and the universe, the more you will marvel at God's incomprehensible power. Creation itself, manifests the greatness of God to us every day of our lives if you have eyes to see.

Sofia Cavaletti is a researcher who has pioneered the study of spirituality in young children. She finds that children often have an amazing perception that far surpasses what they've already been taught. One three-year-old girl, raised in an atheistic family with no church contact at all, no Bible in the home, asked her father, "Where did the world come from?" He answered her in strictly naturalistic, scientific terms. Then he added, "There are some people who say that all this comes from a very powerful being, and they call him God." At this, the little girl started dancing around the room with joy as she said, "I knew what you told me wasn't true—it's him, it's him!" In the same way, the author Anne Lamott was raised by her dad to be a devout atheist. All the children in her family had to agree to a contract to that effect when they were two or three years old. But she started backsliding into faith at an early age. She says, "Even when I was a child I knew that when I said 'Hello,' someone heard." Jeremiah points to a third example of God's greatness

GOD IS IRREFUTABLE.

It's a small statement by Jeremiah, but an important one. "But the LORD is the only true God. He is the living God and the everlasting King!" (Jer. 10:10 NLT) By irrefutable, I mean God is the only God that is authentic, genuine, and real. He and He only truly exists. That begs some interesting questions. Were the idols that Jeremiah blasted and condemned 2,600 years ago real in any true way or were they just imaginary? Well, in one sense, yes, idolatry was and is a very real, powerful, spiritual force of great evil. But in another sense, the answer is no. The false gods of the Old Testament such as Baal or Asherah were never real gods. The idols people worship today are not real gods. The Bible says, "We all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only

one God.” (1 Cor. 8:4 NLT) They’re the work of people’s hands and imaginations. Jeremiah said idol worship was a stupid thing to do and it made people stupid. The Bible says, “Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols.” (Rom. 1:22-23 NLT) You really believe some object you made yourself with your own hands has some kind of life or power of its own? You really believe it deserves your worship?

But here’s a related question. Are all the other gods that human beings worship today throughout the world real in any true way or are they simply imaginary? Again, you can answer that question both yes and no. Approximately 1.6 billion people in the world – about 23% of the world’s population – worship Allah, the god of the Muslims. Allah does not actually exist. He’s not real or true in the sense that the God of the Bible is real and true. But, there is a kind of spirituality in the false religion of Islam that is certainly real. Approximately 1.1 billion people in the world – about 15% of the world’s population – worship the pantheon of gods that make up the Hindu faith. None of those gods actually exist. They’re figments of people’s imaginations. But, there is a kind of spirituality in the false religion of Hinduism that is real. There are 2.2 billion people in the world – about 31% of the world’s population – that identify as followers of Jesus. I wish I could believe all of us worship the one, true God of the Bible. But, the fact is that we can end up worshiping and serving false gods just as well – some of the very ones I mentioned earlier today. How we need to remember that materialism, accumulating wealth, money, and success can become idols - false gods! They’re no-gods. They’re not-God things. They can’t provide us with any true security, significance, or fulfillment. There is only one, true God. He alone is worthy of our worship simply because He is the only One who is God. Here’s a fourth example of God’s greatness.

GOD IS INFINITE.

Again, it’s a small, but significant statement by Jeremiah. “But GOD is the real thing—the living God, the eternal King.” (Jer. 10:10 MSG) Idols, in any and every form, represent a false god, a lifeless god, and a non-existent god. Our God is actually alive. And He’s not just alive for a really long period of time – even millions of years. No, our God is infinite. He was never created or born. He has always just been there. He will never die or cease to exist. He will always just be there. This insight into God gets at the personal name for God revealed to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. That name points to the fact that the one, true God actually lives and He lives eternally. God isn’t derived from nor is He dependent on anything or anyone else. He’s the living spring of His own energy and the ground of His own existence. Just as it was impossible for Him to be born or created, it’s impossible for God to die. He is totally independent of us and doesn’t need us for anything. Wouldn’t it be completely reasonable to expect such a great God to be totally indifferent to us as human beings? But the Bible tells us a very different story. God was and is anything but indifferent to us. He’s been vitally involved with us yesterday, today, and He will be tomorrow. A fifth example of God’s greatness:

GOD IS IMMEASURABLE.

What that means is that God is sovereign. He and His power or authority is unlimited, boundless, and immeasurable in every conceivable way. Jeremiah assumed that truth about God and praised Him for it. “Who would not fear you, O King of nations? That title belongs to you alone! Among all the wise people of the earth and in all the kingdoms of the world, there is no one like you.... ‘O Sovereign LORD! You made the heavens and earth by your strong hand and powerful arm. Nothing is too hard for you!’” (Jer. 10:7; 32:17 NLT)

Most people back in Jeremiah’s time – including the people of Israel – believed in local gods. In Jeremiah’s day, many people thought each nation or country had their own god. Suppose the state of Ohio was its own nation. Suppose the states surrounding Ohio – Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and West Virginia – were their own separate nations. Back in Jeremiah’s day, most people would have believed there was an Ohio god and then a different god for Michigan, Pennsylvania, and so on. So, Israel had the Lord as its God, but Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, or Moab had their own gods. Those gods had power, authority, or sovereignty over and in their own nations, but not so much beyond the borders of their own countries. Jeremiah had to remind God’s people of a truth taught all over the Old Testament. Their God was not a local God. He was the one, true God. He was the only God. He was the real King over all the surrounding nations. No, those nations didn’t recognize Him as such, but that didn’t change the reality. The God of the Bible was and is sovereign.

I don’t pretend to understand God’s sovereignty or how unlimited and boundless He is. I am grateful that He’s not just a local god, aren’t you? He’s not just Rick Breusch’s God, or Karl Road Baptist’s God, or the God who is sovereign over the United States. The Bible teaches us that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is God over and in every nation, every people group, and every organization on the planet – even over and in North Korea, Syria, Iran, ISIS, or Al-Qaeda. They don’t worship Him and they don’t recognize His sovereignty, but that doesn’t change the facts. Jeremiah had to remind God’s people that God’s power is unlimited, boundless, and immeasurable. It’s a message we need to hear, receive, and believe today. Despite outward appearances to the contrary, despite the presence of great evil, despite wholesale rejection of the God of the Bible today in our own country and around the world, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ will have the last word. He can’t be voted out. He’s not going to resign. No one is going to mount a successful coup d’état against Him. He is the one and only king of the nations. He alone is the sovereign Lord.

In C. S. Lewis's children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lucy met a majestic lion named Aslan in the enchanted land of Narnia. Aslan is the Jesus figure in those wonderful stories. Making a return visit a year later, the children discovered that everything had changed radically, and they quickly became lost. After a series of dreadful events, Lucy finally spotted Aslan in a forest clearing. She gazed up into the large, wise face. "Welcome child," he said. "Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger." "That's because you're older, little one," Aslan answered. "Not because you are?" Lucy asked. "I'm not", said Aslan. "But each year you grow, you'll find me bigger." Hasn't that been the case for many of us here today? Every year we grow, we find Jesus bigger in His

grace, bigger in His goodness, bigger in His love, and bigger in His faithfulness. He is immeasurable. Here's a final truth about the greatness of our God.

GOD IS INCORRUPTIBLE.

Jeremiah reminds God's people back then and us today of God's character. By incorruptible I simply mean that God has ultimate and perfect integrity. Jeremiah said, "You show unfailing love to thousands, but you also bring the consequences of one generation's sin upon the next. You are the great and powerful God, the LORD of Heaven's Armies, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds. Your eyes are open to the ways of all mankind; you reward each person according to their conduct and as their deeds deserve." (Jer. 32:18-19 NLT) On the one hand, God is loving, gracious, and merciful beyond our comprehension. On the other hand, God always upholds what is just and right because He is the judge of the universe.

Because Jeremiah lived some 600 years before Jesus, he could only proclaim God's integrity in a limited way. He could not have known fully what God was going to do through and in His Son. But you and I know because we're on the other side of the cross and the empty tomb. The fact is that at the cross, God's love and God's justice came together in a marvelous way. God didn't just overlook your sin or mine. He didn't just arbitrarily dismiss it and say, "No big deal. It doesn't matter." He did justice to it. He judged your sin and mine by allowing Jesus to pay the penalty of death for it. That is love, grace, and mercy that leaves us speechless. So it is that at the cross, we see the greatest demonstration of God's integrity. He was both loving and just. He was both gracious and righteous. He was both merciful and holy. Our God is incorruptible.

If you insist on standing before God on the basis of your own supposed merits and pathetic, flawed "goodness", He will let you do that on the final Day of Judgment. If you reject Jesus as your Lord and Savior, that's your only other option. But with the utmost confidence on the basis of God's Word, I will tell you that not one man and not one woman will ever enter Heaven on that basis. That is precisely why Jesus came, why Jesus died, and why Jesus rose again. I read an amazing quote recently by Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City. In a recent interview, he pointed to his work on gun safety, obesity, and getting people to stop smoking. He said with a grin, "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close." Now, Michael Bloomberg is a very brilliant man, a very capable man, and a very wealthy man – a billionaire. But when it comes to the most simple, basic, central truth about God and how to have a relationship with Him, He is a fool. God is incorruptible. We come to Him on His terms not our own. God does not grade on a curve or overlook anything. And in and through Jesus, He is both perfectly loving and perfectly just. God has full integrity.

Author Joshua Harris writes about a girl he knew personally who used to think the stars were tiny specks of light just over her head. He's not kidding. And she wasn't in grade school when she believed this. No, she was in college before she learned the truth. She was intelligent in many ways. But one day in a conversation with Joshua she

mentioned that she had just learned that stars in the night sky were actually really, really far away. Joshua asked her what she meant. She said, "You know, they're not just right up there [on the ceiling]. They're not just tiny dots. They're really far away." Joshua was incredulous. "What did you think they were before?" he asked. "I thought they were, you know, just right up above us."

My message today has been about the doctrine of God. God's attributes. What God is like. Why did I choose to speak about that? For the same reason that it's worth knowing that stars are not tiny pinpricks of light in the ceiling just above our heads. When we know the truth about God, it fills us with wonder. If we fail to understand His true character, we'll never be amazed by Him. We'll never feel small as we stare up at Him. We'll never worship Him as we ought. We'll never run to Him for refuge or realize the great love He's shown or the measureless distance He bridged to rescue us through the Lord Jesus Christ. God is incomparable, incomprehensible, irrefutable, infinite, immeasurable, and incorruptible. God is so great! Let's count the ways even though we'll never be able to name them all.